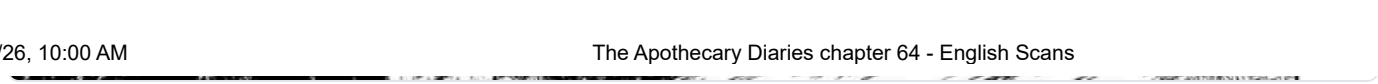
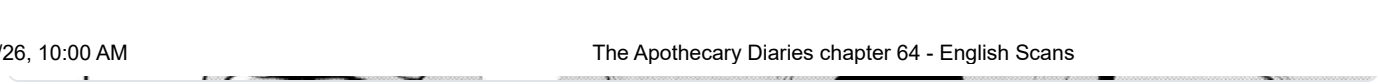
Chapter 64: The Masked Gentleman



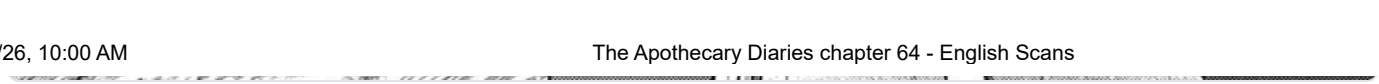
LOOKING FOR SOMETHING?
THAT'S ...!



GRAB
WHY DO YOU—?!
GHK!
THMP
ARF
THE DOG DOESN'T SEEM VERY FOND OF YOU.
ARF ARF ARF

I ASSUME YOU PASSED ON TAKING IT HUNTING...
...BECAUSE OF THIS.
THREE FEIFA IN TOTAL. A FOREIGN WEAPON.
LIKELY THE LATEST MODEL FROM THE WEST.

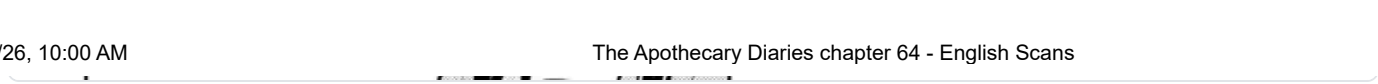
BANG
THE EXPLOSION ISN'T CREATED BY LIGHTING A FUSE. INSTEAD, THIS METAL PART CREATES A SPARK.
...AS BEFORE.
THE SAME SMELL...
BLACK POWDER IS A MIXTURE OF SALTPETER, CHARCOAL, AND SULFUR.
ON EXPLODING, IT EMITS A VERY DISTINCT SMELL.
A SMELL NOT UNLIKE ROTTEN EGGS.
WE JUST HAD TO GIVE THE HOUND A SNIFF OF THAT SMELL...
...AND HE LED US RIGHT TO THE FEIFA.



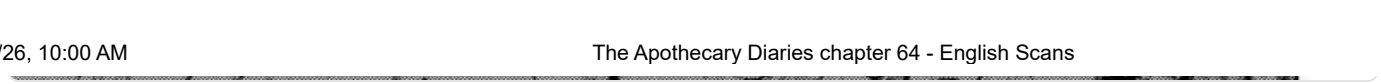
EVEN IF WE CAN'T SMELL IT...
...THE SCENT OF THAT POWDER REMAINS ON YOU.
STRONG ENOUGH FOR THE HOUND TO CATCH.

I DO FEEL SOME REGRET FOR SETTING THAT OLDER GENTLEMAN UP AS BAIT FOR THIS TRAP.

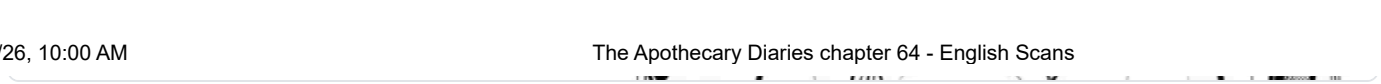
WHO'S A GOOD BOY?!



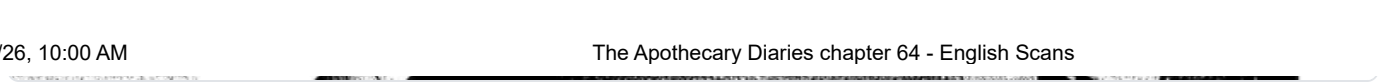
A FEIFA ISN'T THE MOST ACCURATE WEAPON.
AND IT'S NOT ESPECIALLY SUITED TO THE ROCKY TERRAIN OF THIS MOUNTAIN.
BUT DESPITE THAT, THEY ELECTED TO COME AFTER JINSHI WITH THESE.
PERHAPS BECAUSE THESE ARE THE LATEST MODELS?
EVERYONE CONNECTED TO THIS MAN...
...IS ALREADY UNDER WATCH, SO THEY CAN BE APPREHENDED AT ANY MOMENT.
ALL THAT'S LEFT IS TO WORK OUT THE EXACT NATURE OF HIS CRIMES.
SOON AFTER, THE MASKED GUEST OF HONOR RETURNED TO THE FEAST...
...AND THE HUNT CAME TO A CLOSE.



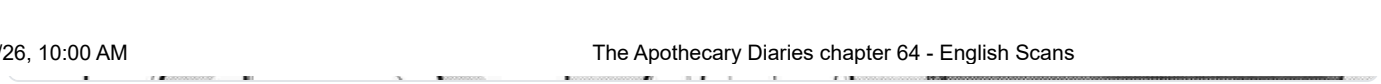
ANOTHER MATTER PUT TO REST, ANOTHER PIT IN MY STOMACH.
THREE FEIFA IN TOTAL. A FOREIGN WEAPON.
LIKELY THE LATEST MODEL FROM THE WEST.
...THE WEST.
JUST LIKE WITH SUIREI, WE HAVE NO IDEA WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN PULLING THE STRINGS BEHIND THIS OPERATION.
IT'S FRUSTRATING, BUT PANICKING WON'T HELP.



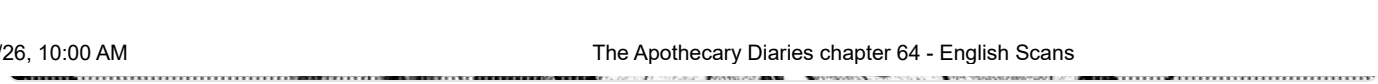
THE LAST ARRIVALS FROM THE WEST WERE THOSE ENVOYS, LOOKING LIKE MIRROR IMAGES OF ONE ANOTHER.
GAO SHUN SHARED A STORY OF ONE OF A PAIR OF TWINS CONCEIVING A CHILD...
...AND I HAD CONSIDERED THAT PAIR MAY HAVE CONCEIVED SOMETHING ELSE.
BUT THE DISCOVERY OF FEIFA OF AN ENTIRELY UNKNOWN ORIGIN...
...NECES-SITATES A DIFFERENT VIEW.
ALL COUNTRIES DESIRE THE LATEST AD-VANCEMENTS IN WEAPONRY ...
...BUT ARMS TRADING ITSELF CAN STOKE THE FLAMES OF WAR.
PUBLIC TRADE MUST BE DONE THROUGH THE IMPERIAL COURT.
SO IF THE AMBASSADORS SLIPPED AWAY FROM THEIR OWN LOCKED ANNEX FOR THAT PURPOSE ...
...THEN WE MAY BE ON THE EDGE OF MORE DANGER THAN I IMAGINED.



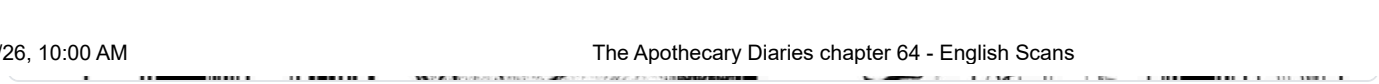
THAT, OR...
...THEY HAVE AN EVEN MORE POWERFUL BENEFACTOR.
HOW MUCH CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE APPREHENDED OFFICERS?
HOW MUCH DO THEY EVEN KNOW?
WHATEVER IT IS, I HOPE THIS IS RESOLVED QUICKLY.
I'D HAVE NO PROBLEMS IF PEOPLE WOULD STOP BRINGING ME THEIRS.
...I SHOULD SLEEP.
CLACK...



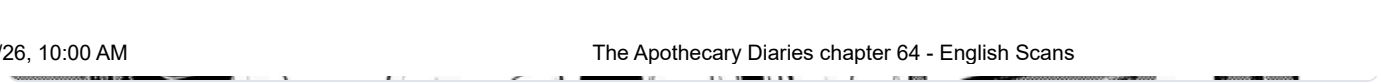
NOK
NOK
GAO SHUN SHOULD BE ATTENDING THE BANQUET ABOARD THE SHIP TONIGHT.
SWSH
スッ
GCK
!
WHAT DOES HE WANT NOW?!



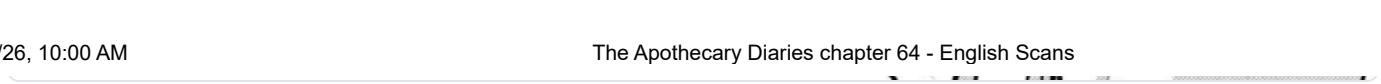
HE ELECTED TO PASS ON THE BANQUET?
WELL, HE'S THE LAST PERSON I WANT TO SEE RIGHT NOW.
IF YOU WOULD RATHER NOT OPEN THE DOOR...
...THAT'S FINE. I DON'T MIND.
I IMAGINE I GAVE YOU QUITE A FRIGHT TODAY.
I'M SORRY.



HE WANTS TO SAY SOME-THING...
...BUT HE CAN'T WILL THE WORDS TO COME OUT.
I FEEL THE SAME WAY.
I DON'T NEED TO SEE HIM TO IMAGINE THE FACE HE MUST BE MAKING.

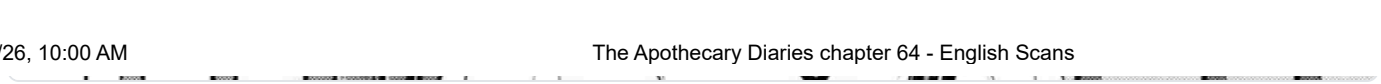


DO NOT LET IT CONCERN YOU.
I SHOULD EXPRESS MY APOLOGIES AS WELL.
FOR INSISTING ON THE WORD MODERATE.
UGH...
WHAT COULD HE BE THINKING NOW?
HMMM...
EVENTUALLY, I STOPPED CRYING ENTIRELY. COULD BE I LEARNED NOTHING WOULD COME OF IT.
NO MATTER HOW MUCH I CRIED, NOBODY WOULD COME UNTIL THEIR WORK WAS FINISHED.
WHEN I WAS A BABY, THE WOMEN WHO RAISED ME WERE COURTESANS WHO PRIORITIZED THEIR WORK.
UNDERSTANDING OTHERS' HEARTS IS BEYOND ME.

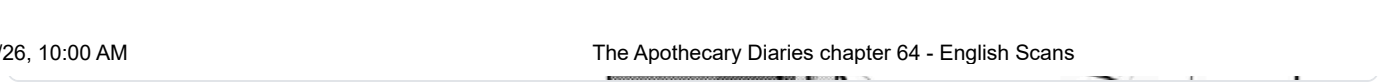


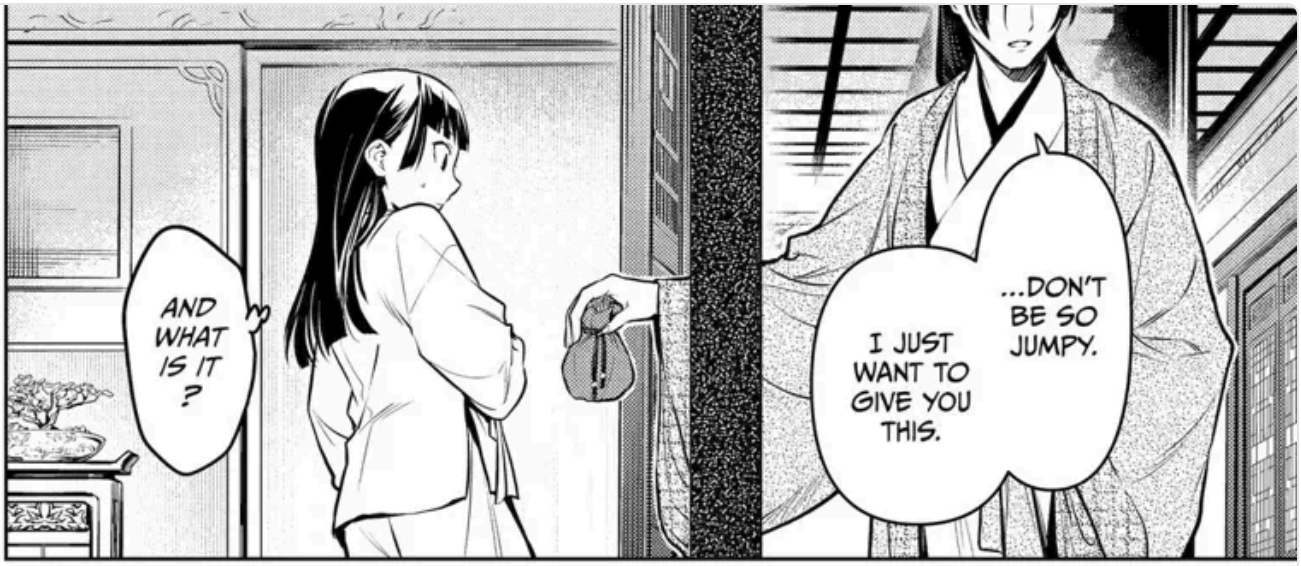
I WOULDN'T KNOW FOR SURE, BUT MAYBE THAT'S WHY I'M SO UNAFFECTED BY BOTH AFFECTION AND MALICE.
I JUST DON'T CARE.
AND AS A CONSEQUENCE, I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY RIGHT NOW.
...I HAVE NOTHING MORE TO ADD.
IN MY EYES...
...YOU...
...WILL ALWAYS BE YOU, SIR JINSHI.

AH
I FORGOT HIS ALIAS.
STILL. THOSE ARE MY TRUEST THOUGHTS.



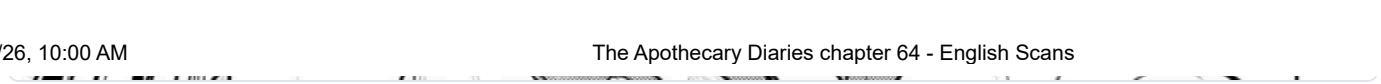
PFF
IT'S NOT AS THOUGH I'LL BE SEEING THEM ANY TIME SOON.
WHETHER HE HAS A PAIR OR NOT MAKES NO DIF-FERENCE TO ME.
IRST
WHAT IS THAT IN HIS VOICE?
I'LL ALWAYS BE ME IN YOUR EYES, HUH?
SWSH
JOLT



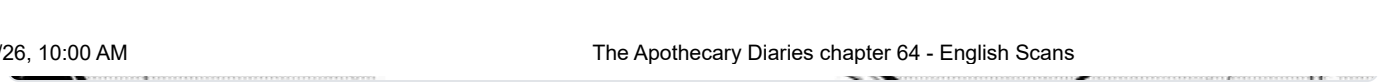

AND WHAT IS IT?
I JUST WANT TO GIVE YOU THIS.
...DON'T BE SO JUMPY.

I COULD ONLY GET YOU THE BEAR GALL BEFORE...
...SO I TOLD MYSELF...
...I'D SHARE WHAT I HAVE TO SAY WHEN I GOT THIS.

GRP
BECAUSE ...
...THERE'S SOMETHING YOU NEED TO KNOW, NO MATTER WHAT.
SHIVER
I KNOW THAT THIS WILL JUST... FURTHER INCONVEN-IENCE YOU...
...BUT IT'S WHY I BROUGHT YOU ALONG ON THIS TRIP IN THE FIRST PLACE.
THIS...
THIS IS...

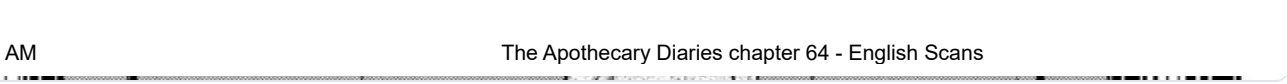


OX BEZOAR!

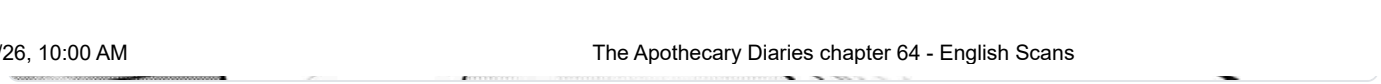


CATTLE GALLSTONES! THESE ARE INCOMPREHENSIBLY VALUABLE!
THE INGREDIENT I'D ALWAYS DREAMED OF!
はあ HAAH
AND I'M HOLDING IT THIS VERY MOMENT!
BEZOAR ...
はあ HAAH
YES.
I FINALLY PROCURED SOME.
AH!
I MEAN, NO! THAT'S NOT WHAT I—

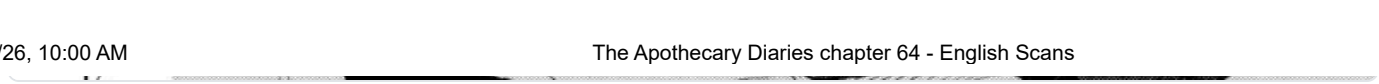
THANK YOU SO MUCH!
I BID YOU GOODNIGHT!
CLACK
WELL!



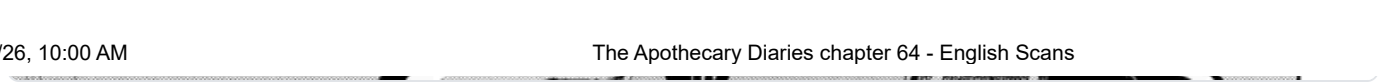
THD
I'M NOT FINISHED TALKING!
THD
HEY!
DON'T YOU SHUT THE DOOR ON ME!
CLATTER
THD
AHH!
AHH HAAH!
I WON'T LET ANYONE DISTURB US, NOW THAT I HAVE YOU!



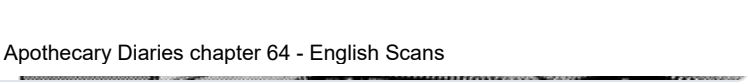
POFF
JUST THE SIGHT OF YOU GIVES ME ALL THE ENERGY I COULD EVER NEED.
WHETHER OR NOT JINSHI IS A EUNUCH HARDLY MATTERS TO ME.
BUT IF HIS SECRET WERE TO GET OUT...
...WE COULD BE IN REAL TROUBLE.



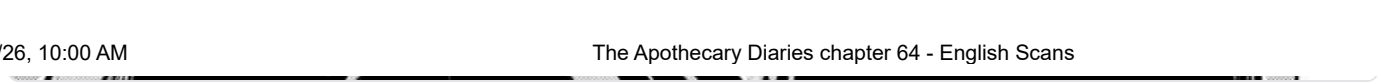
WELL, IF THAT EVER HAPPENS ...
...I CAN JUST MAKE HIM A EUNUCH MYSELF.
SHUDDER...
FORMALLY, THE MASKED GUEST'S ABSENCE TODAY WAS JUST CHALKED UP TO ONE OF HIS CAPRICIOUS WHIMSIES.
UNDERNEATH THAT, HOWEVER, IT IS NO SECRET THAT A FACTION OF OFFICERS HAVE BEEN TAKEN AWAY.



HE WAS CROSS, OF COURSE, BUT HE IS A SIMPLE MAN. A BANQUET LIKE THIS IS ENOUGH TO PLACATE HIM.
LO-EN WAS FALSELY ACCUSED ...
...IN ORDER TO SMOKE OUT THE SCOUN-DRELS.
AND THEY'RE UNLIKELY TO BE SEEN ON THE PUBLIC STAGE EVER AGAIN.
I AM NOT IN A POSITION TO BE SEEN COZYING UP TO THE MASKED GENTLEMAN.
..."GAO SHUN" WAS CALLED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS HUNT ON BEHALF OF "JINSHI."
BUT EVEN IF HE HAD COME ...
...SO I HAVE YET TO SPEAK WITH HIM.
THE MASTER ELECTED NOT TO ATTEND TONIGHT ...

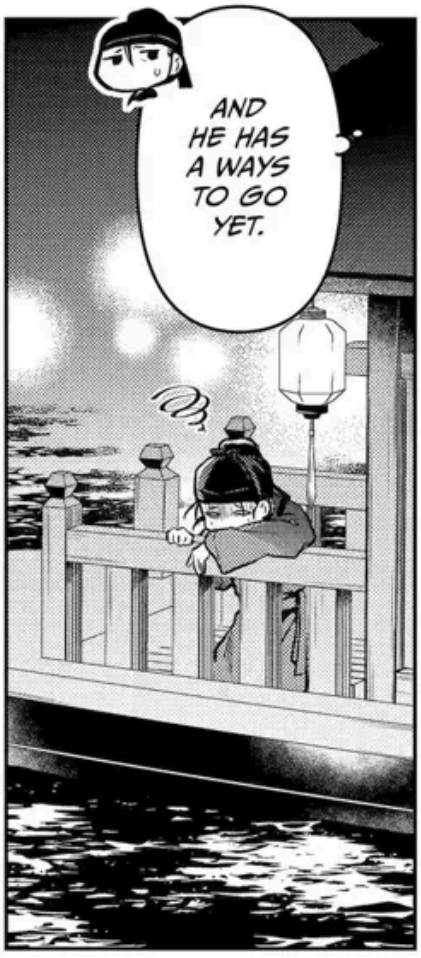


I WONDER IF HE WAS FINALLY ABLE TO TELL HER.
WHEN THEY RETURNED, HE AND XIAOMAO SEEMED SOMEWHAT DISTANT.
I IMAGINE THE THREAT TO HER LIFE GAVE HER A SHOCK...
...BUT SHE IS NOT THE TYPE TO SHY FROM DANGER.
SHE'S A VERY CLEVER ONE. MAYBE THAT CHANGE IN ATTITUDE...
...IS A CONSEQUENCE OF HER CONSIDERING WHERE SHE MAY GO FROM HERE.
BUT FOR HER TO BE READY FOR WHAT MAY COME ...
... SHE MUST BE TOLD THE TRUTH, SOONER OR LATER.
IN TIMES OF CRISIS, THE MORE CARDS WE HAVE TO PLAY, THE BETTER.
...BRINGING HER ALONG WAS WORTHWHILE, EITHER WAY.
PERHAPS THIS MAY COME OFF AS CALLOUS, BUT...

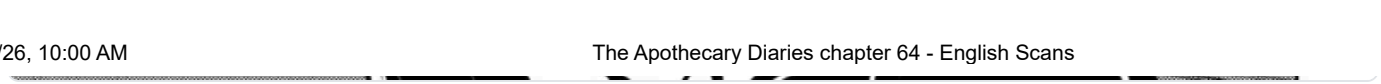


...THIS BANQUET ENDS SOON.
CHATTER ガヤ
I HOPE...
CHATTER ガヤ

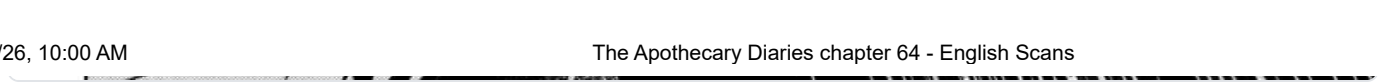
I SUPPOSE THERE ISN'T MUCH THAT WOULD INTEREST A EUNUCH HERE, IS THERE?


AND HE HAS A WAYS TO GO YET.

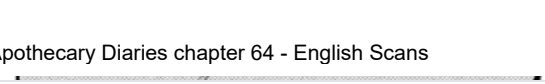
AS A MARRIED MAN, NO, I'M NOT ONE TO BECOME INFATUATED WITH OTHER WOMEN.
YOU POOR SOUL. IMAGINE, IF I'D BEEN THE ONE TO OFFEND THE EMPRESS...
...IT COULD BE ME IN YOUR POSITION.
AT THIS BANQUET, "GAO SHUN" IS TREATED SIMPLY AS A MEMBER OF THE MA CLAN.
BUT "GAO SHUN" ONCE PRO-VOKED THE EMPRESS'S WRATH AND WAS STRIPPED OF HIS CLAN AND MANHOOD BOTH.
THAT IS THE STORY.
THAT IS ANCIENT HISTORY.
I MUST SAY, IT'S A SHAME THE BEAUTIFUL EUNUCH COULDN'T JOIN US.
PERHAPS.



WE WERE JOINED BY THE MASKED GENTLEMAN, HOWEVER.
HA HA
RIGHT, I SUPPOSE HIS FACE IS STRIKING, TOO...
...IN A MUCH LESS AGREEABLE WAY.
THE BEAUTIFUL EUNUCH IS, OF COURSE, REFERRING TO JINSHI.
NOT TO THE GENTLEMAN RESTING IN HIS QUARTERS AT THIS VERY MOMENT.
THAT GENTLEMAN HAD SEVERELY BURNED HIS FACE IN THE PAST...
...AND CONSEQUENTLY STAYS CONFINED TO HIS ROOM, NEVER REMOVING HIS MASK, NO MATTER HOW WARM IT GETS.
SAY...
...AREN'T YOU CURIOUS ABOUT TODAY?
THAT IS THE STORY.

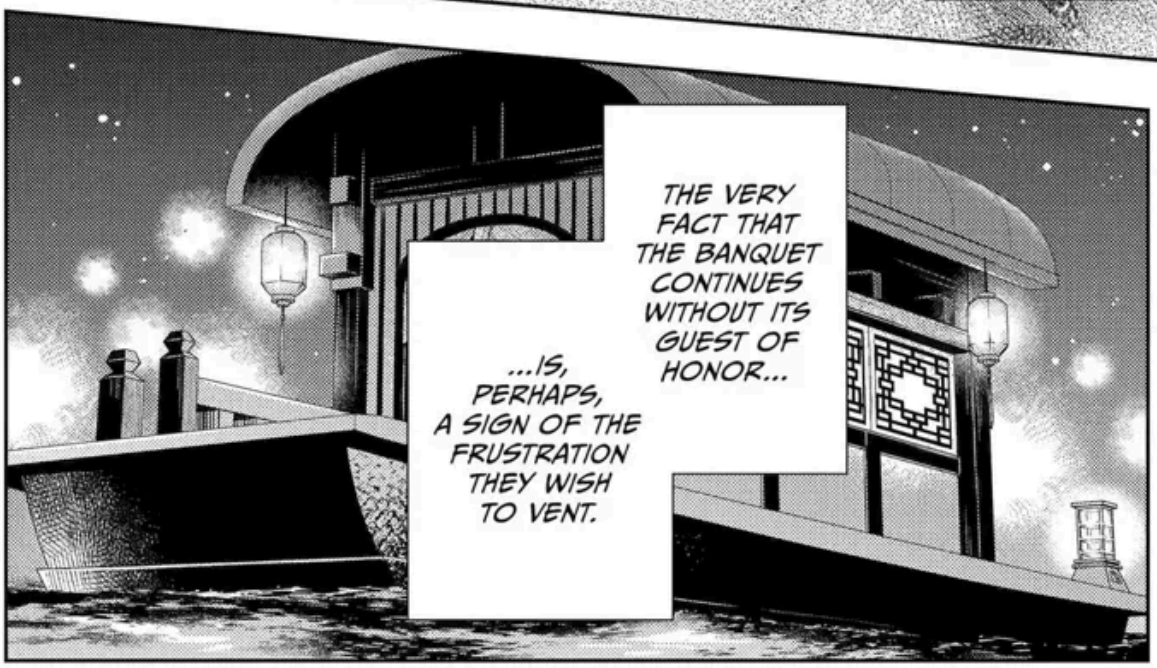


REALLY, NOW.
ALCOHOL IS NOT TO BE TAKEN LIGHTLY.
FOR HIM TO BROACH THAT TOPIC WITH ME...
HIS WORDS ARE WITHOUT REVERENCE.
THE MASKED GENTLEMAN SCARCELY LEAVES HIS ROOM, AND NEVER SHOWS HIS FACE.
FEW WOULD THINK THE IMPERIAL YOUNGER BROTHER IS A GOOD FIT TO RULE.
THE EMPEROR MUST BE CONCERNED ...
...WITH SOMEONE LIKE HIM AS THE CROWN PRINCE.
"LIKE HIM."

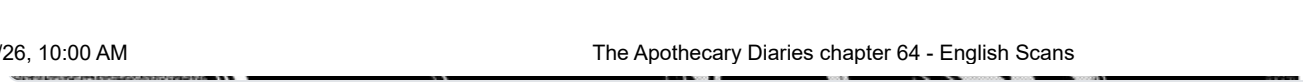


I IMAGINE FOR MANY, THEY CAME ALMOST IN JEST, JUST TO CATCH A GLIMPSE OF HIM.
THE IMPERIAL YOUNGER BROTHER.
...RARELY SEE OUR ESTEEMED GUEST OF HONOR.
THE OFFICIALS GATHERED TO COME HUNTING ON THIS TRIP...

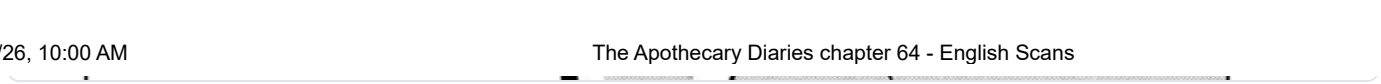
...MUST HAVE SET THEM ALL ON EDGE.
AND THE SHEER DISRESPECT THEIR VERY OWN PEERS DEMONSTRATED TODAY...
OF COURSE ...
...NONE WERE ABLE TO SEE HIS FACE UNCOVERED.


THE VERY FACT THAT THE BANQUET CONTINUES WITHOUT ITS GUEST OF HONOR...
...IS, PERHAPS, A SIGN OF THE FRUSTRATION THEY WISH TO VENT.

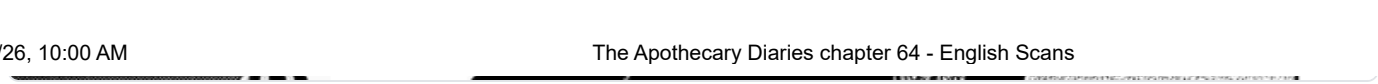
BUT GENERALLY, OFFICIALS COME AWAY WITH ONE OF TWO IMPRESSIONS OF THE IMPERIAL YOUNGER BROTHER.
...OR THEY ELECT TO WAIT AND SEE.
THEY EITHER SEE HIM AS INCOMPETENT...
THEY ARE ALL WELL WITHIN THEIR RIGHTS...
...TO BE CURIOUS AS TO WHAT KIND OF MAN HE IS.
THE FORMER HAVE REASON TO APPROACH "GAO SHUN" TO TALK...
ARE ANY OF THE CONSORTS EXPECTING SINCE THE POOR PRINCE'S UNFORTUNATE PASSING LAST YEAR?
...ABOUT THIS.



UNFOR-
TUNATELY,
NO.
WHICH CONSORTS ARE WITH CHILD? AND WHAT OF THE SEX OF THE CHILDREN THEY BEAR?
BUT THERE ARE MANY CONSORTS.
RIGHT ...
IN TIME, ONE WILL SURELY BEAR A CHILD.
THAT WILL HAVE A PROFOUND EFFECT ON THE BALANCE OF POWER WITHIN THE IMPERIAL COURT.
IN THAT CASE...



HE SEEMS TO BE TAKING THE MEASURE OF THE FLATTERERS IN HIS WAKE.
NOBODY ELSE HERE IS RELATED TO ANY OF THE CONSORTS.
THE HOST OF THE BANQUET, SHISHOU.
CLC
CLC
ONE, THE EMPEROR THAT PRESIDES OVER THE NATION. THE OTHER, HIS YOUNGER BROTHER.
THE CHARACTER FOR FLOWER, KA, IS RESERVED FOR THE NAMES OF A SELECT FEW IN LI.
TWO, AT THIS MOMENT.



I WONDER ...
...HOW IS KA ZUIGETSU HOLDING UP, AT THIS MOMENT?